

## SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

B174/2.3 iii

### SQA BOARD – 8 OCTOBER 2025

Minutes of the meeting of the joint meeting between the SQA Board and the Qualifications Committee held at 10am on Wednesday 27 August 2025 on MS Teams.

#### Board Members

- \* Ms S Rogers (Chair)
- \* Mr N Page (Chief Executive)
- \* Ms A Davis
- \* Mr S Hagney
- \* Mr G Smith
- \* Prof K Thomson
- \* Mr J Morton
- \* Ms C McFarlane
- \* Mr S Hewitt
- \* Mr R Erskine
- \* Ms M Wailes

#### Qualifications Committee Members

- \* Mr Stuart McKenna
- \* Prof Jo-Anne Baird
- \* Mr David Swinney
- Mr Jon Reid
- \* Ms Yasmeen Hussain
- Ms Jennifer Davies
- Mr P Bain

#### SQA Officers

- \* Ms J Blair
- \* Mr J Booth
- \* Mr M Campbell
- \* Mrs D Mahmoud
- \* Mr J McMorris
- \* Ms D Stewart
- \* Mr M Ware
- \* Mr D Walsh
- \* Ms Gill Mann
- \* Mr Alasdair Smith
- \* Ms Sarah Brown
- \* Mr Chris Boulter

\* Indicates present at the meeting.

## In attendance

[REDACTED], SQA  
[REDACTED], SQA  
[REDACTED], SQA  
[REDACTED], SQA

## 1 OPENING REMARKS

### 1.1 Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed all members of the Board and the Qualifications Committee to the call for the annual joint meeting between the two groups. A particular welcome was extended to Mr Page, the new Chief Executive, to Ms Brown, Senior Advisor for the Schools Unit, and to [REDACTED], who had recently joined the Corporate Governance Team as [REDACTED]. Apologies were noted from Mr Bain and Mr Borley, SQA.

The Chief Executive provided members with a short introduction and shared his initial thoughts and priorities for the organisation, including a programme of functional business reviews that were underway across the organisation. He highlighted that accreditation and qualifications reform must be embedded within the wider context of education reform and noted that the transition to the new body, Qualifications Scotland, presented a valuable opportunity to do so. He emphasised the importance of ensuring that the organisation remained agile, took a leadership role where appropriate, and responded effectively to the needs of its stakeholders. Most importantly, he stressed that learners must remain at the forefront of the organisation's work, ensuring that they benefit from innovation and remain at the cutting edge of developments in education and qualifications.

### 1.2 Declaration of Any Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest raised in relation to the agenda.

## 2 AWARDING 2025 PRESENTATION FOR BOARD & QUALIFICATIONS COMMITTEE

Ms Stewart introduced the session, supported by colleagues from the Executive Management Team. She was joined by Mr Boulter, Head of Data Analytics, and Ms Brown who contributed to the discussions and presentations.

Mr Boulter provided members with a detailed analysis of data from the current year's examination diet, together with a recap of key metrics. He explained that the A–C attainment gap had narrowed slightly across all levels of National Qualifications, and he confirmed that grade boundary data showed that qualifications were performing broadly as expected. Members also received an overview of dual entry patterns between National 4 and National 5, as well as evidence of increasing diversification of qualifications, with more learners engaging in Higher National and vocational qualifications within the senior phase. Mr Boulter highlighted significant growth in the use of assessment arrangements and noted that work was underway with partners in the education community to gain a better understanding of the drivers of this growth and its implications, particularly across different SIMD areas. While responsibility for attainment rests primarily with schools and

local authorities, he emphasised that the data produced by SQA plays an important role in supporting government and partners to identify good practice and raise standards.

Mr Booth then presented an overview of communications and candidate support. He described the handling strategies and partnership approaches that had been in place throughout the results period. He noted the impact of Storm Floris, which had caused postal delays in rural areas, and explained how a rapid communications response had been deployed to provide reassurance. Social media engagement was somewhat lower than in the previous year, when the results email issue had caused traffic to increase significantly, but partner organisations had actively shared SQA's messages, and there had been strong regional celebration of learner success stories. Importantly, the communications strategy ensured that the focus remained on learners rather than on the organisation itself, with particular success in promoting vocational qualifications and alternative pathways. Post-results activity had also maintained momentum by continuing to highlight vocational qualifications through case studies.

Ms Blair followed with an update on the appeals process. She confirmed that the service remained free of charge and was accessible either directly by learners or via schools and colleges, with no requirement for estimate eligibility. Priority appeals, relating to university or college places, training opportunities, or employment, were being processed first, with results to be communicated to centres on 1 September and to UCAS on 2 September. Standard appeals would close on 29 August, and the outcomes would be shared with centres in early October. Ms Blair spoke about preparations for the 2026 exam diet. The annual lessons learned exercise had been completed, and a number of improvements with clear actions, ownership, and timescales had been identified. She confirmed that publication of the 2026 exam timetable was imminent, pending approval from the Scottish Government, and this would enable more detailed planning around marking, quality assurance, and deployment of appointees. She noted that the NQ Strategic and Working Groups would be reconvened to support engagement for the 2025–26 session.

In discussion, members welcomed the presentations and reflected on the matters raised. They agreed that further consideration was required regarding the role and value of Advanced Highers, particularly in supporting learners to make appropriate choices in S6. It was suggested that collecting learner feedback on their experiences with Advanced Highers could help inform the advice and guidance provided.

Members observed that communications had matured considerably in recent years, with the work of previous cycles now producing visible results. The team was congratulated on delivering a successful results year, and appreciation was extended to partners who had amplified SQA's messages. Members stressed the importance of sustaining this momentum as the organisation transitions to Qualifications Scotland. They were informed that the University of Glasgow had approached SQA to participate in a European project examining learner progression from 2020–21 into higher education.

Members discussed the rapid growth in assessment arrangements, which was seen as a matter requiring further investigation in terms of its impact on qualifications, teachers, and centres. It was emphasised that such arrangements should be consistently applied across the academic year and not limited to the final examination. Finally, members noted that while the Scottish Baccalaureate remained available, its impact continued to be constrained by timetabling challenges in schools.

Ms Stewart then went on to deliver a further presentation on education reform. She provided an overview of senior phase reform in response to the Hayward Review, highlighting the intention to rationalise the qualifications offer, remove external written examinations from practical subjects where appropriate, and expand the range of assessment methods, with a particular focus on digital assessment. She also explained that models were being explored for organising graded courses such as National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher into modules, while avoiding a return to the unit-based structure that had been previously removed at the request of the Scottish Government and teaching unions.

Ms Stewart outlined the links between this work and the post-school learning and skills agenda identified in the Withers Review, which emphasises parity of esteem, coherence, and clear pathways for learners. She noted that a wider audit of post-school qualifications and pathways was underway, with the aim of rationalising and refining publicly funded provision. Members were informed that there remained strong calls from a number of sectors for the introduction of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement.

Ms Stewart gave an overview of the strands of activity being developed in both the short and long term for qualifications and assessment reform. She underlined the importance of progressing this work collaboratively with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland, taking a whole-portfolio approach that considers the needs of all learners.

Mr Ware then presented an update on the review of qualification types. He explained that the review would assess the purpose of Higher National and vocational qualifications, examine current patterns of use, and identify areas of duplication or ambiguity. This would inform changes designed to ensure qualifications remain fit for purpose. He highlighted key activity to map pathways and progression opportunities, with the aim of supporting lifelong learning, reducing complexity, and maximising attainment opportunities. Mr Ware confirmed that policy teams for National Qualifications and HN/VQs were working together to determine the role of work-based learning as part of a reformed senior phase.

Looking ahead, Mr Ware explained that the next steps would involve refining the scope and timescales for reform under the governance of the Qualifications and Assessment Reform Board. He added that a communications and engagement strategy was being developed and that early engagement with the Curriculum Assessment Board would take place before wider consultation in early 2026.

Ms Brown emphasised the central role of engagement with schools in supporting this work. She explained that the Schools Unit would act as the primary interface with schools and underlined the importance of strong subject-specific engagement. She highlighted the need to combine SQA's expertise in assessment with the practical realities of classroom delivery. The removal of written examinations in practical subjects was viewed as a positive signal of trust in teachers' professional judgement and recognition that practical demonstration is a valid form of assessment. Members agreed that it was vital to approach reform collaboratively, ensuring that changes were done with schools rather than imposed upon them.

Further points raised included the importance of embedding metaskills throughout reform activity, reflecting industry demand. The potential role of artificial intelligence in digital assessment was also discussed. Members were informed that national conversations were already taking place regarding AI in learning, teaching, and assessment, and that SQA colleagues were contributing to these discussions.

In closing, the Chair thanked all members of the Board and the Qualifications Committee for their valuable contributions to a wide-ranging and constructive discussion.

**3 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business raised.

**4 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The Chair noted that the Board would next meet on Wednesday 8 October 2025, at SQA's Lowden office.